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Rahner's 'Tough Love' for the Church: Structural Change as Task and Opportunity

Introduction

A period of Rahner's life that has received insufficient attention is that following his formal retirement as a professor at the age of sixty-seven in 1971. This was a particularly vibrant and fruitful time in Rahner's life: a period in which he found considerable acceptance of his views in the mainstream intellectual community; a time during which many of his more theoretical reflections found expression in terms of concrete argument and debate for Church reform; a stage in which he was at his most courageous in criticizing those impeding Church renewal, renewal which he considered vital and necessary if the Church was to be able to respond with energy and credibility to the increasing secularised cultural context. Rahner's formal retirement as a professor coincided with the beginning of the Synod of the German Church, in which he was fully and energetically engaged. His stature in the German Church at that time meant that his views had to be taken seriously by all concerned. This chapter will review that period in Rahner's life and explore what the Church today can learn from his work during that period, on the basis that the issues he sought to tackle are still current, and that his proposals still deserve a hearing. But first, it is important to locate our reflections within the context of how Rahner is currently perceived within the Church.

Rahner – Missing? Missed?

It is often remarked that in our present cultural context 'God is missing but not missed.' Could it be said of Rahner that he is missing but not missed in contemporary theological debate? Yes and no. Rahner is missing from the bibliographies of courses taught in some seminaries and ecclesiastical faculties, if not so much in the German-speaking world, at least in other parts of Europe and in the USA. There are perhaps two main reasons for this. The first is that as Rahner scholarship has developed over the past twenty-five years, a number of important questions have been raised regarding both the validity and the usefulness of his transcendental method in a post-modern cultural context, questions that could and should be raised about the value of the legacy of any of the 'theological giants' in changed cultural circumstances.¹ Rahner, whose style was to prefer critical students to unquestioning disciples, and whose personal piety and humility ensured that his own work was always subordinate to service of the Christian faith, would have welcomed and encouraged such investigations.

There is a second reason why Rahner is increasingly missing in some quarters. As John Allen noted even in 2003, just prior to the election of Benedict XVI, 'If the Rahnerians held the upper hand for the first 20 years, the Balthasarians dominate today, at least in terms of official Church teaching and policy.'² Since the election of Pope Benedict XVI this situation has intensified, and the popular perception in some ecclesiastical quarters today is that Rahner is not really 'safe' and that study of Rahner might lead one into difficulties with Church authorities.

1 This will not be the subject of this current paper. In addition to other contributions to this volume, see Declan Marmion and Mary Hines eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), see esp. Part III 'Conversations Ongoing.'

2 See <<http://www.nationalcatholicreporter.org/word/word112803.htm>> accessed October 2009.

Significantly, no serious theologian or senior Church official has ever argued convincingly that Rahner was unorthodox.³ It is worth briefly reviewing, for example, Joseph Ratzinger's critique of Rahner, which has always been expressed within a fundamental framework of deep respect for Rahner's achievement. Ratzinger, for instance, shows a greater appreciation of the complexity of the actual theological problems Rahner sought to address than did Von Balthasar.

Arguably, Ratzinger knew Rahner better than any of Rahner's other critics because they collaborated closely at the time of the Council, especially in the context of *Dei Verbum*. Cardinal Avery Dulles commented in 2006 that Ratzinger was 'unduly' reliant upon Rahner at that time.⁴ In his biography published in 1997, Ratzinger says that it was this period of close working together in the early 1960s that led him to the conclusion that despite agreement on many matters, Rahner and he, 'theologically lived on two different planets.'⁵ Yet, in his *Introduction to Christianity*, first published in 1968, Ratzinger acknowledges that his whole chapter on 'The Ecclesial Form of Faith' is 'much indebted' to an essay by Rahner.⁶ Subsequently, in 1978, Ratzinger defended Rahner's transcendental method which, he said, 'does not pretend to deduce Christianity purely from itself.' It is, he recognized, 'a presupposition of understanding that becomes possi-

- 3 Von Balthasar comes close in *Theodramatik* III (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1980), 253–62. In the context of a conference on Rahner at the Lateran University in 2004, to mark the twentieth anniversary of Rahner's death, the then Secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Archbishop Angelo Amato, now Pro-Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, said: 'Notwithstanding some ambiguous formulae, Rahner was an orthodox Catholic theologian.' See <<http://www.nationalcatholicreporter.org/word/word031204.htm>> accessed October 2009.
- 4 Avery Dulles, 'From Ratzinger to Benedict,' *First Things*, 160 (February 2006), 24–29.
- 5 Joseph Kardinal Ratzinger, *Aus Meinem Leben. Erinnerungen (1927–1977)* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1998), 131. Translation mine.
- 6 Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 97.

ble because the faith has already opened up the field of thought.⁷ In 1982, in *Principles of Catholic Theology*, Ratzinger engaged in his most detailed critique of Rahner in his section on 'Faith and History.' Here, again, despite deep concern that Rahner has not succeeded in doing justice to what is peculiarly Christian, Ratzinger nonetheless considered Rahner's mediation between the particularity of Christianity and its claim to universality to be 'the most effective and surely the most penetrating of these attempts.'⁸

This is not in any way to seek to diminish the very real differences that clearly emerged between them towards the end of the Council, and which persisted from then on.⁹ However, when we see that even the present Pope in his most important theological writings engaged with Rahner not simply to refute him but genuinely to advance key theological questions with which they were both preoccupied, there is no justification for excluding Rahner from genuinely Catholic theological debate. In fact, one could take their scholarly engagement with one another as a model for similar engagement and critique today.

Yet, it is, as Cardinal Karl Lehmann, the most senior ecclesiastic who studied under Karl Rahner, remarked earlier this year (2009), 'shameful'

- 7 Joseph Ratzinger, 'Vom Verstehen des Glaubens. Anmerkungen zu Rahners *Grundkurs des Glaubens*,' *Theologische Revue* 74 (1978), 177–86: 184. Translation mine.
- 8 Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 162ff. Although unjustifiably himself accusing Rahner of deviating from an orthodox understanding of the integral nature of doctrine, Mark Lowery has a point in suggesting that Ratzinger, writing in *Principles*, does not seem sufficiently to take account of 'the two-faceted dimension of Rahner's method that is rooted in a two-fold dynamic of sacramental causality.' He speculates that Ratzinger has relied in the main on Rahner's presentation of his method in *Foundations of Christian Faith*, in which Rahner fails to explicate the implications of his theology of symbol sufficiently. See <<http://www.ewtn.com/library/THEOLOGY/FR91302.htm>> accessed 22 October 2009. It is generally recognized that Rahner's presentation of his method in *Foundations of Christian Faith* is problematic.
- 9 In 1970, in the context of preparations for the German Synod, Rahner refers to the fact that he is lined up on one side of disputed questions, Ratzinger, the other. See Karl Rahner, *Im Gespräch Band 1: 1964–1977*, Paul Imhof & Hubert Biallowons, eds (Munich: Kosel, 1982), III.

how occasionally one finds today that Rahner's deep love of the Church is called into question, as well as the fact that he always acted in good faith and in the best interests of the Church.¹⁰ The result is that increasingly we have some priests and theologians, who have ingested at best second-hand, a contextual and distorted criticisms of Rahner, avoiding him because they genuinely do not believe that he is trustworthy, or, much less nobly, because studying Rahner would not be in the perceived interest of their theological or ecclesiastical careers.

The above notwithstanding, it would be utterly wrong to put Rahner on the 'missing list' as the study of Rahner's approach to Christian faith is as vibrant and focused as heretofore. For example, since 1995, Herder have been publishing a revised collection of Rahner's works which now runs to over thirty volumes and includes texts not previously published, such as Rahner's doctoral dissertation presented at Innsbruck in 1936.¹¹ In 2008, the Karl Rahner Archive moved from Innsbruck to Munich where it has been re-established and resourced substantially by the German Jesuit Province.¹²

Nonetheless, Rahner's current significance has somewhat waned, and his influence is missing, especially when it comes to addressing those people disappointed and at times even angry with God, those who, in the past, were able to find in his theology a pathway to self-acceptance and self-surrender that respected the needs both of head and heart. His influence is also missing when it comes today to responding to the many people wounded and even scandalized by the Church, those who, previously, were helped by his theology to accept that the pilgrim Church is itself also a Church of sinners continually dependent upon God's mercy, love and forgiveness. It is missed also by those seeking an authentic basis for Christian mission, which takes seriously and in no way seeks to diminish the reality of God's

10 See the Karl Rahner Archive 2009 lecture given by Cardinal Karl Lehmann: 'Was bleibt von Karl Rahner? Theologische Programmatik für heute und morgen' <<http://www.karl-rahner-archiv.de/index.php?id=2&rubrik=17>> accessed October 2009.

11 *E latere Christi: Der Ursprung der Kirche als zweiter Eva aus der Seite Christi des zweiten Adam. Eine Untersuchung über den typologischen Sinn von Joh 19, 34.*

12 See <<http://www.karl-rahner-archiv.de/>> accessed October 2009.

grace at work outside the confines of explicit Christian faith. It is missed especially in the contemporary dialogue with non-Christian religions.

What was Rahner doing in the early 1970s?

When he retired from his chair at the University of Münster in 1971, Rahner returned to the Jesuit community in Munich where he took up an honorary professorship at the *Hochschule für Philosophie*. A number of universities conferred him with honorary doctorates around this time: Leuven (1972), and Georgetown, Duquesne, Chicago and Madrid (1974).¹³ During this period he also received several civil academic awards and prizes, testimony to the wider reception and impact of his work.

Rahner had been appointed to the International Theological Commission in 1969 but he resigned from it before his term was up in 1974. Subsequently, he gave among his reasons that the commission had become superfluous because the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was not taking its recommendations seriously.¹⁴ He also considered its work to be 'boring' and 'inefficient', and, according to Vorgrimler, he found some of his younger colleagues to be both malicious and arrogant.¹⁵ It must also have been the case that Rahner felt increasingly isolated within the commission, given that many of its members collaborated together in 1972 to establish *Communio* in opposition to *Concilium* of which Rahner had been a key founder.

- 13 In the 1960s, Rahner had already received honorary doctorates from Strasbourg, Münster, Notre Dame, St Louis and Yale; and in 1970, from Innsbruck.
- 14 Paul Imhof & Hubert Biallowons, *Faith in a Wintry Season: conversations and interviews with Karl Rahner in the last years of his life* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 154.
- 15 Herbert Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner: An Introduction to his Life and Thought* (London: SCM, 1986; German original 1985), 108.

In the early 1970s Rahner was working on *Foundations of Christian Faith*. This had its origins in lectures he gave while he held the chair for Christian *Weltanschauung* and Religious Philosophy in Munich from 1964 to 1967, and was eventually published in 1976.

At this time he also disagreed publicly with Hans Küng's rejection of papal infallibility. He did this in a personal capacity and also as a member of the German Bishop's Faith Commission, on whose behalf he edited a volume opposing Küng's position.¹⁶ Rahner, who had collaborated with Küng in the founding of *Concilium*, stated unambiguously that Küng contradicted teaching obligatory for a Catholic. Küng countered that Rahner's approach was to keep re-interpreting magisterial decisions until he could agree with them, sometimes sacrificing the original meaning of the defined doctrine in the process.¹⁷

However, it was issues of Church reform that most commanded Rahner's attention around this time. In the early 1970s Rahner published several essays on this topic, many of them dealing with the same fundamental issues from different perspectives.¹⁸ The focus of his attention was

16 See *Stimmen der Zeit* 185 (1970) 73–81. The article subsequently appeared as 'On the concept of infallibility in Catholic Theology' in *Theological Investigations* 14, 66–85, and also in a collection he edited, *Zum Problem der Unfehlbarkeit. Antworten auf die Anfrage von Hans Küng* (Freiburg, 1971). Rahner spoke openly about his work for the German Bishops in opposing Küng in an interview in 1972. See *Im Gespräch Band 1*, 181–84.

17 See *Faith in a wintry season*, 151.

18 As these essays are scattered throughout disparate volumes of *Theological Investigations*, we might not realize that they all stem more or less from the same period. A sample will serve to highlight his academic preoccupation at this time (dates are given here for publication of the English translation): 'The Church as the sending of the spirit' (1971); 'I believe in the Church' (1971); 'The future of the Church in Germany' (1972); 'The new image of the Church' (1973); 'Dialogue in the Church' (1973); 'Church, Churches and Religions' (1973). The following all appeared in 1974: 'Transformations in the Church and secular society'; 'Is Church Union Dogmatically Possible?'; 'On the Structure of the People of the Church Today'; 'Opposition in the Church'; 'Perspectives on the future of the Church'; 'Religious Feeling Inside and Outside the Church'; 'Schism in the Catholic Church'; 'The Church of Sinners'; 'The function of the Church as a critic of society'; 'The Sinful Church in the Decrees of Vatican II';

the Synod of the German Church which had been called in early 1971. We will frame the remainder of this paper around Rahner's engagement with the Synod, and in particular the publication of his book *The Shape of the Church to Come*, which appeared first in 1972.¹⁹ This text was effectively Rahner's charter for the practical implementation of the Council's teaching in terms of the life of the Church in Germany, but, as we shall see, it had, and arguably still has, import for the universal Church.

The Synod of Würzburg

The Joint Synod of the Dioceses of the Federal Republic of Germany, also known as the Synod of Würzburg, which took place from 1971–1975, was convened by Cardinal Döpfner to reflect upon and to concretise the implications of the Second Vatican Council for the German Church. A close working relationship between the German bishops and their theologians had developed in the context of the Council. Effectively, Rahner, who was still a member of the International Theological Commission, was an 'official theologian' to the bishops at this time, and it would have been unthinkable to convene the Synod without his involvement, and indeed that of the other German theologians who had been so involved in the Council.²⁰ These included, of course, Joseph Ratzinger, who by now represented a clearly emerging contrary theological orientation to that of Rahner. Significantly, however, it was Karl Lehmann, Rahner's former student, who was commissioned to write the Synod's official report.

'The Teaching Office of the Church in the Present-Day Crisis of Authority': 'Third Church?'

19 Karl Rahner, *Strukturwandel der Kirche als Aufgabe und Chance* (Freiburg: Herder, 1972) was published under the title *The Shape of the Church to Come* (London: SPCK, 1974). The German title translates: 'Structural change in the Church as both task and opportunity.'

20 See Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, 106.

As background, it is important to note that in 1967, Rahner had been involved in drafting a remarkable statement of the German Bishops about the role of the Magisterium. The Letter, both in its tone and content, was already a significant appropriation of conciliar teaching with regard to the Church's teaching office. Faced with the dilemma of either having to arrive at a doctrinal decision of an ultimately binding nature or else of having simply to remain silent, the Church, the Letter argued, must take the risk of making statements that may include error. Thus, such statements, while clearly to be taken as authoritative, must nonetheless be understood to have a provisional character. The Letter states explicitly that the Church can err and has in fact often erred in matters that are not defined teaching:

The Church can be subject to error and has in fact erred ... Beyond her guardianship of the inner substance of the faith the Church has, even at risk of going sometimes into error, to formulate teachings which have a certain degree of authority, while yet, since they are not definitions of faith, they are sufficiently provisional to admit a possibility of error.²¹

Subsequently, Rahner often referred to this Letter, including in his response to *Humanae Vitae* where he cites it at length.²² In particular, he welcomed its appropriation of the Council's teaching on freedom of conscience, the exercise of which, for Rahner, had always to go hand in hand with loyalty to the Church.²³ He also noted the significance of the fact that the Holy See never protested against the Letter's content.²⁴

Despite his general good standing with the hierarchy, Rahner's involvement in and contribution to the Synod was not universally welcomed. There

21 'Letter of the German Bishops to All those Entrusted by the Church with the preaching of the Faith' (22 September 1967); the original is *Schreiben der deutschen Bischöfe an alle die von der Kirche mit der Glaubensverkündigung beauftragt sind*. Vorgitmler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, 108, refers to the Letter as 'his (Rahner's) own text.'

22 'On the Encyclical "Humanae Vitae"', *Theological Investigations* 11 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), 263-87. The article first appeared in 1968.

23 Vorgitmler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, 108.

24 See *Faith in a Wintry Season*, 150. Ironically, had the Holy See considered the Letter to be erroneous it would have proven that, de facto, it was not.

was a public exchange of views in the early stages of the Synod with Cardinal Höffner of Cologne which serves to highlight both his and Rahner's concerns as the Synod commenced. In his end of year address in 1970, just before the Synod first met, Höffner attacked unnamed proponents of 'depraved' theology who sought to undermine dogma, and stressed that anyone who denied the divine sonship of Christ, the resurrection, or the Virgin Birth, or questioned the indissolubility of a validly contracted and consummated marriage was no longer a Catholic. Höffner's position was similar to that of curial officials at the start of the Council who had sought to identify the doctrinal non-negotiables and get them taken off the table from the beginning.

At the commencement of the Synod three days later, Rahner, whose personal assent to and defence of defined teaching could not be in doubt, most recently because of his critique of Küng, pointed out that the bland reiteration of such teachings does nothing to address the concrete situation in which believers find themselves today. As he subsequently wrote in an open letter to Höffner:

Today it is not enough for the Church to see to it that she says what is true; it is not enough for her to defend her orthodox statements simply through the monotonous reassertion of her formal authority; she must more than formerly see to it that what she says should seem credible in its content and so should support and disemburden its formal authority.²⁵

Very little, in Rahner's view, could be achieved merely through lazy appeals to authority, regardless of the authority's legitimacy. The present context demands that we consider in an intelligent and credible manner what *precisely is defined* by defined teaching, and distinguish what is irrefutable from changeable formulations. Rahner said that there is no such thing as a 'chemically pure' dogma, and he gives concrete examples in this regard. He also reminded Höffner that the praxis of the Church is not only determined by the dogma of the Church but also by magisterial teachings

25 'Cardinal Vs. Theologian,' *The Month*, April 1971, 104-7: 106ff. See also the introduction by Edward Quinn to *The Shape of the Church to Come*, 4.

which, as the cardinal along with his fellow bishops admitted in their 1967 Letter, can be and indeed often are wrong.²⁶ It was Rahner's view that the Synod had to face up honestly to how the Church's Magisterium could credibly and effectively exercise its authority in a cultural context in which a merely formulaic appeal to authority was useless.

Structural change as both task and opportunity

Rahner was not an ecclesiohistorian as such. His demands for ecclesial reform are grounded in his understanding of the Church as the historical real presence of God's universal salvific will in Jesus Christ. Christ and the Church are one great sacrament of grace for the whole world.²⁷ He has often been accused of undermining the Church's sense of mission. It is, in fact, the theology of salvation and grace adopted by the Council that undermined an understanding of mission predicated on the premise of saving souls that would otherwise be lost. Rahner's understanding of the Church as primordial sacrament offers a renewed understanding of mission which accommodates the reality that most people are saved without the Church's institutionalized means. The Church needs people who, by their faith and lives, manifest unambiguously God's grace effective outside the Church's visible confines. In particular, the Church's mission is to manifest God's salvific will to the poor and the oppressed; to those considered 'life's failures'.²⁸

In keeping with his understanding of the theology of grace, the post-conciliar Church must be an *open* Church, and this is the main thrust of

26 Significantly, in their exchange, both Rahner and Höffner cite Ratzinger in support of their position.

27 See G. Wassilowsky, 'Kirchenlehrer der Moderne: Ekklesiologie' in Andreas R. Batlogg et al, *Der Denkweg Karl Rahners* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 2003), 224-25.

28 *The Shape of the Church to Come*, 60.

what he has to say in *The Shape of the Church to Come*. In a lecture in 1989 to commemorate the fifth anniversary of Rahner's death Johann Baptist Metz focuses in particular on this period of Rahner's life.²⁹ The courage which the Council Fathers showed in embracing a vision for reform needed, after the Council, to be reinforced by another kind of courage; this time of concrete imagination, of a willingness to engage in real transformation. Rahner exemplified this second kind of courage for Metz, and it was rooted, he believed, in Rahner's deep sense of needing to be accountable to the men and women struggling to have and to live Christian faith in the post-conciliar period. In fact, according to Metz, this sense of accountability was the organizational principle for Rahner's work at this time.

The Shape of the Church to Come is comprised of several short chapters which set out to address three fundamental questions: Where do we stand? What are we to do? How can a Church of the future be conceived? The rest of this paper will summarise the key points Rahner makes in this short but significant book.

Where do we stand?

We are facing the end of a homogeneous Christian society; we are undergoing transition from a traditional *Volkskirche*, in which the Christian community corresponded directly to the local geographical civil community, to a Church that is the community of believers standing as a remnant *apart* from this civil community. The civil community will be essentially a-theistic;

29 The text is given as the Introduction to the 1989 edition of Rahner's book. See J. B. Metz, 'Fehlt uns Karl Rahner? Oder: Wer retten will, muß wagen' in Karl Rahner, *Strukturwandel der Kirche als Chance und Aufgabe* (Herder: Freiburg, 1989). It is also translated into English as 'Do we miss Karl Rahner?' in Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998).

the general and public consciousness will be characterized by the empirical sciences and their methods which practically speaking deny God.

Far from lamenting this situation, Rahner argues that it is to be welcomed. The homogenous Christian society 'was not at all necessary for a true and ecclesial Christianity.'³⁰ Christians are never absolved of the concrete free personal decision that must be made to live by and embrace faith, and this reality is more evident when one lives in a culture that is unsupportive of faith. The essential task of a personal free assent to God remains unaffected by the transition. It is important, he argues, to identify that which remains forever in order to hand it on, realising that this may need to be expressed in new forms in the new cultural context.

The instinct of office-holders, Rahner notes, is always to defend things as they are, to choose the safe and familiar over that which is new and untried. He refers to the old moral theological principle of tutorism according to which in cases of moral doubt it is best to follow the safer course or that in agreement with the law. In the post-conciliar situation what is needed is the direct opposite approach: in cases of doubt what is needed is the willingness to risk change, on the basis that the existing situation has no possibility of enduring in to the future. While they have a responsibility to defend what is essential, Rahner argues, Church leaders must distinguish this from the changeable forms in which what is essential found expression in a homogenous Christian society; they must engage in the difficult task of discernment in this regard. They also equally have a responsibility, at a time of transition, to look to the future courageously, in order 'to provide for the Church's endurance in a situation still to come.'³¹

Rahner refers to the Church in the new situation as 'the little flock.'³² Whether the little flock is to be a ghettoised sect or not will depend not on its numbers but upon its attitude and mentality. If the only Christians who feel comfortable in this new community are those who thrived in the homogenous Christian society; if the new community merely has the iden-

30 *The Shape of the Church to Come*, 25.

31 *Ibid.*, 26.

32 *Ibid.*, 29-34.

tical character of the society that has passed but in miniature form, then it will indeed be a sect. If it seeks to defend 'cosy traditionalism and stale pseudo-orthodoxy, in fear of the mentality of modern men and women, and consents to the departure of restless, questioning people from the Church,'³³ then it will be, *de facto*, a ghetto, regardless of its numerical strength. The Church will lose its essential identity if it is satisfied with merely holding on defensively to what it can.

Rahner considers the extent to which the so-called Christian society whose passing we grieve was more a secular, historical and social, rather than a genuinely graced phenomenon. Those who are of the view that all is lost with this society's decline must accept the reality that Christian faith was therefore overly dependent on this particular societal form. In any cultural context authentic Christianity is transmitted only through active faith, genuine proclamation of the Gospel, and faithful living witness, and it must be possible in every cultural context to discover appropriate means of transmitting Christian faith.

The urgent task is to find new forms through which these can be realized. Rahner therefore calls for the Church to adapt an offensive rather than defensive strategy. What follows here from Rahner might seem rather harsh, a form of what we people today might call 'tough love' for the Church, in order to guarantee that it both survives and flourishes. This 'tough love' takes two forms: it is directed at traditional Catholics, and at Church leaders.

The Church in the new situation will have limited resources and these must all be deployed in the service of the Church's mission. Rahner says it is more important to win one 'new' Christian than to keep ten 'old' Christians because 'the possibility ... of winning new Christians from a milieu that has become unchristian is the sole and convincing evidence that even today Christianity still has a real chance for the future.'³⁴ Traditional Catholics may well be disturbed by changes but their personal salvation is not likely to be at risk. Fresh conversions provide vital evidence that new forms have

33 Ibid., 30.

34 Ibid., 32.

been found which successfully mediate what is essentially Christian in a manner which is credible to a new generation of believers who in turn will hand on Christian faith.

Criteria for choosing bishops also need to change. Most Church leaders were formed in the Pian epoch which only ended with the Council. During this period, the emphasis was on the unchangeability of the Church. Priests formed in this period and who have 'adapted themselves very smoothly to the traditional machinery of the Church' will not necessarily make the best leaders in the emerging missionary context.³⁵ Instead we should choose bishops for the future from among priests who are proven missionaries; who have won converts from the new milieu, even if their manner and approach, when judged by the standards that applied in the previous homogenous Christian situation, seems unconventional or even 'scandalous'.

Rahner argues in *The Shape of the Church to Come* for the acceptance of the reality that with the decline of a homogenous Christian society we will see the emergence of a plurality of Christian forms. We can see this as potentially positive if, in a spirit of tolerance, these diverse forms are prepared to make compromises, to make room for each other. It is also a help to realize that all structural forms in the Church, from an eschatological perspective, are provisional and that ultimate harmony in the Church is not something we can expect to accomplish as the people of God still journeying through history. The significance of the Council endorsing the understanding of the Church as a pilgrim people should not be underestimated.

Rahner does not argue for a bland uniformity or the diminishment of difference; the Spirit can be at work when diverse groups struggle self-critically and honestly without viewing each other as 'the enemy'. Polarisation occurs not because there are diverse groups within the Church that hold contrary views but because these groups cease to pray and work together with each other. As the situation worsens, individuals can find that they become inevitably identified with one side or the other and are forced to take sides. Rahner calls for Christians to resist this and to remain vigilant in humble self-criticism. At the same time, he defends the right of Christians

35 Ibid., 33.

to form diverse groups and says that such groups should be treated with respect even if not officially sanctioned by Church authorities, noting that pressure which such groups might seek to exercise on authority is not illegitimate simply because certain authorities do not like it.

What are we to do?

Renewal requires the making of concrete decisions. Rahner complains that 'It is in the details that we come up against both God and the devil, but the Church seems to be proclaiming only generalities.'³⁶ It is not acceptable that office-holders 'put forward either merely colourless principles which upset no one or what are supposed to be their own private opinions, which, for that very reason, interest no one.'³⁷ Thus what is needed is for the Church both locally and globally to act with a level of decisiveness of historical significance. The reality is that all we know with certainty about the future is that it will be different from the present. However, the fact that we do not see the future clearly cannot be allowed to paralyse when it comes to planning for and implementing change. The renewal of a local Church after the Council requires both courage and creative imagination. Because resources, whether of people, property or spiritual energy, are limited, tough decisions have to be made by Church authorities involving very often 'a choice between several conceivable and in themselves defensible possibilities.'³⁸ The German Synod will have to make difficult decisions which will disappoint some, perhaps indeed many of those most at home in the Church of the past. It simply is not realistic to think that it can bring everyone with it.

36 Ibid., 76.

37 Ibid., 76.

38 Ibid., 47.

Rahner begins this section with some comments on the papacy, defending it along the lines he had been doing in the controversy with Küng. At the same time, he stresses the subservience of the office to the Holy Spirit. He also points out that there is much about how the papacy is exercised that is borrowed from secular juridical categories and thus that is historically conditioned and changeable. In fact, change in how the papacy is exercised is unavoidable if the papacy is to exercise effectively its ministry of unity in a World-Church.³⁹

Rahner calls specifically for a declericalised Church. By this, he means the elimination of the view that the Church's office-holders somehow form an elite core of Christians. "The "hierarchy" in the real nature of the Church is not identical with the hierarchy in the Church's social structure."⁴⁰ The Church's true 'hierarchs' are 'those who love, who are unselfish, who have a prophetic gift in the Church.'⁴¹ The Church is declericalised when office-holders themselves are evidently acting in accordance with the promptings of the Spirit and not merely relying upon their formal authority. A declericalised Church is also one in which priests and bishops accept joyfully and humbly the fact that 'the Spirit blows where he wills and has not arranged an exclusive and permanent tenancy with them.'⁴²

Rahner also argues here for what today we would call 'horizontal accountability.' Formal authority does not exempt priests and bishops from seeking to win the genuine assent of those affected by decisions they take. Secrecy is counterproductive: 'Office loses none of its authority or dignity if [a] decision and the reasons for it are made public at the same time.'⁴³ Nor is dignity lost, especially in the context of massive cultural change, if office-holders admit to doubts and uncertainties. There must be courage

39 See Rahner's two later essays on the future of the papal office: 'The dream of the Church,' *Theological Investigations* 20; 'The perennial actuality of the papacy,' *Theological Investigations* 22, in which he speaks in the voice of a newly elected pope.

40 Ibid., 57.

41 Ibid., 56.

42 Ibid., 57.

43 Ibid., 59.

to experiment, as well as to admit mistakes and failures, and this will not undermine clerical authority in a world in which people no longer believe that priests or bishops have a hotline to heaven.

With regard to the articulation of the Church's moral vision in the future, Rahner makes three points in support of a morality that is not mere moralising.⁴⁴ If we take seriously the reality of grace outside the Church, then there is no basis for viewing the world as fundamentally amoral or immoral; we have a responsibility to trace back our moral principles to the innermost experience of human nature which gives rise to the natural law and which gives Christian moral principles their binding force; in addition, the Church has a responsibility to support the formation of consciences so that people can make autonomous moral decisions in complex situations.

How can a church of the future be conceived?

Rahner concludes this second section, and leads in to the third, by calling for a Church of real spirituality and a Church of open doors. The Church of the future needs a deeply rooted but also unambiguously confessed spirituality. The Church would be betraying its mission to the world if it merely resembled a humanitarian welfare association. Human beings cannot endure the human condition in the long run 'unless they are redeemed into the open freedom of God.'⁴⁵ God's grace gives Christians the strength to witness to hope despite their own sense of guilt and sin. It is only such witness that can convince people that despite the ever-present darkness the world is essentially graced and life is trustworthy.

Rahner has two sections specifically on an open Church which must be read against the emergence of movements within the German Church

44 Ibid., 64-70.

45 Ibid., 87.

that in his view sought to march it into the ghetto.⁴⁶ These groups set themselves up as the defenders and arbitrators of orthodoxy and were in denial regarding the complexity of many of the issues facing the Church. They were too quick to brand as heretical legitimate views which differed from their own. Rahner makes two points in this context: there can be a plurality of orthodox positions on a number of issues facing the Church today; in addition, complex issues and dilemmas facing the Church need to be worked through with patience.

The Church must adopt an open stance because theologically speaking it is difficult to judge who is or is not to be counted among its members:

If a person does not quite explicitly and publicly make a firm profession of the Christian faith – and this is far from being established by registered denominational membership or necessarily assured by some sort of practice of religion – it is not certain that, as a so-called Christian in this pluralistic society, he really possesses *that* faith which is necessary for church-membership in the theological sense.⁴⁷

We cannot assume on the one hand that all those formally registered as Church members possess genuine Christian faith, or that a widespread *fides implicita* exists among the unchurched, on the other. Strategically, it is best, Rahner argues, to view the fluidity and indefiniteness of the Church's frontiers positively. There is a danger in a Church of the remnant to view hostilely those not fully committed to Christian faith, thinking that those who are not with us must be against us. We must resist the temptation to see such people as a threat to our own sense of identity. Instead, both those who are merely attached to the Church sociologically, and those who view the Church with good will and have a real interest in understanding Christian faith but cannot yet fully identify with the Church, should be considered positively. They should be regarded as we would catechumens in the early stages of their journey towards full commitment in faith.

Rahner has a practical proposal to make regarding ecumenism, which he sees as an urgent task. Until now we have predicated institutional unity

46 *Ibid.*, 70–74; 93–101.

47 *Ibid.*, 72.

upon full unity of faith and theology. Could this not be done in reverse? Could we not first establish institutional unity, which is not the same as uniformity, and thus allows for some plurality? And from that united basis could we not then work towards full unity in faith? After all, he notes, 'there is a considerable difference between the faith as known and accepted in practice by the majority of Catholics and the teaching of the institution with its subtle nuances.'⁴⁸

Rahner concludes *The Shape of the Church to Come* by reflecting on a Church which evolves from the grassroots, and which accommodates many democratic principles. Rahner is of the view that in the future basic Christian communities will develop organically. He sees no problem with these communities proposing their own leader for ordination, acknowledging fully the role of the local bishop to assess the suitability of candidates and insist on their proper training and theological education. He conceives of such people receiving what he calls a 'relative' ordination, perhaps with different appointment criteria applying and duties and responsibilities confined to their own particular community.

Rahner says that we must stick firmly to the principle that 'the ordained leader of the Eucharistic celebration and the community leader as such have to be one and the same.'⁴⁹ There must be a unity between leadership of the community's Eucharistic celebrations and the exercise of other leadership roles in the Christian community. Otherwise, the sacramental element of the community's life becomes detached from the community's everyday life and we end up with the same type of separation of leadership roles as we had in the medieval Church when feudal landlords employed priests as their spiritual functionaries.

This is a very important comment upon what has in effect become the practical way of dealing with the declining number of priests in Western Europe. Priests today are appointed titular parish priests of several parish communities, sometimes called clusters, where in theory they are to exercise pastoral oversight. However, in practice, it is simply not possible for

48 Ibid., 105.

49 Ibid., 111.

them to exercise a genuine, nurturing and community-building leadership. There may be one or more 'assistants' who in effect exercise community leadership apart from leadership in sacramental celebrations. But such a coping mechanism is, as Rahner has noted, theologically highly questionable. Rahner takes it as theologically self-evident that if a bishop is unable to appoint an ordained priest to a particular Christian community, then in accordance with the principle *salus animarum suprema lex* that community may present to the bishop for ordination a leader from among themselves who has the necessary qualities of leadership, even if he is married.

There needs to be a greater role for priests and laity in the selection and appointment of parish priests and bishops and there is no reason why in such instances the whole community should not at least have an advisory vote regarding this and other important decisions which will impact directly on them. The process of formally appointing office-holders in the Church has varied greatly throughout the Church's history and this shows that it is entirely legitimate to adapt such procedures to the concrete human and social situation in which such appointments take place.⁵⁰

Finally, into the future the Church must be much more socially committed. Vatican II recognized that social conditions and institutions may be marked by sin. The Church needs to take account not only of the reality of personal sin but also of sinful structures in society, and critique these in light of the Gospel. It would effectively be a denial of the incarnation for the Church, on the one hand, to reduce Christianity to a mere humanitarian and social reality, but equally, on the other, to view the drama of salvation as something played out only in the individual believer's private inner world. In order to be able to witness effectively to salvation the Church must acknowledge its own structural shortcomings. It needs especially to 'allow [the] desire for freedom to become more effective in her internal life.'⁵¹

50 Ibid., 120.

51 Ibid., 127.

Conclusion

Rahner pleaded for an 'aggressive fidelity' in terms of implementing the Council. Readers can compare and contrast the vision for renewal articulated by Rahner in the early 1970s with that which has dominated in the Church in the intervening period. While at first glance the approach adopted by Pope Benedict might seem to satisfy Rahner's criteria for an offensive rather than defensive strategy, arguably, it is fundamentally a defensive approach. This is perhaps most evident in the current underlying operative theology of grace which emphasizes its costliness more than its prevalence. The understanding of grace determines everything in terms of Church strategy. The endorsement, for instance, predominantly of models of Christian community which ground their Christian identity in their distinctiveness and difference, and take a sceptical view of 'the world' from which they see themselves as separate, runs the risk of ghettoizing the Church. In contrast, Rahner would encourage Christian communities to understand themselves to be the sacramental presence of grace that freely exists everywhere and which is not a threat to their sense of distinctive identity and mission; to see themselves at the service of this grace in terms of drawing it out and bringing it to its fullness.

Change in the Church is not an option. The only option is whether change is chosen or forced upon us; to discern the changes that *must* be made in order to remain faithful to that which cannot and should not be changed. Rahner would want us today to be confident in the abiding presence and guidance of the Spirit so that we can embrace change as a graced opportunity for renewal of the Church in its mission.